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CENTCOM FOR POLAD - AMB HOLZMAN

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SUBJECT: THE PRESIDENT'S 28 JUNE SPEECH PROVOKES BOTH  
APPLAUSE AND COMPLAINTS FROM IRAQI POLITICIANS

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert Ford.  
Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

1. (C) SUMMARY. The President's 28 June speech provoked both positive and negative reactions from the Iraqi political class in Baghdad. We heard appreciation for the President's continuing commitment to fighting terrorism, keeping troops in Iraq, and supporting Iraq's political process. On the other hand, the President's stated commitment to keeping troops in Iraq gave some politicians an opportunity to tell us they believe the Coalition Forces' continued presence is a problem. One contact complained the President's message that the US will fight terrorists in Iraq rather than at home left some Iraqis with the sense that Americans did not value Iraqi lives. The President's support for reconstruction efforts met with universal skepticism. Indeed, many of our contacts say reconstruction promises jeopardize American credibility because Iraqis continue to "hear talk but see no action". The President's speech served as a valuable reminder of the USG's need to accurately communicate and convey our goals and actions. END SUMMARY.

2. (C/NF) PolOff discussed President Bush's speech 29 and 30 June with various Transitional National Assembly (TNA) members. The members, to whom PolOff distributed a copy of the speech in Arabic, had substantive comments on the range of issues presented in the speech. The individuals interviewed were TNA constitutional committee member and Sistani representative in Karbala Ahmed al Safi, SCIRI member and constitution committee member Jalal al-Saghir, independent Shia Islamist 'Abd al Hadi al-Hakim, and 'Adil Nasir Haji, a Yezidi Kurd from the KDP. They focused on the messages the President delivered on fighting terrorism, no troop withdrawal, reconstruction, and the political process. Of note, our contacts also complained the Arabic translation we distributed of the speech provided by Washington was abysmal; the wording did not make sense, was out of order and there were letters missing.

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Mixed Reviews on Fighting Terrorism  
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3. (C/NF) SCIRI member Jalal al-Saghir applauded the speech's clear message that it would fight terrorists and "would not stop until it finishes them." Unfortunately, Saghir said the US's commitment to and reasons for fighting terrorism did not get reported to Iraqis in the media in a positive way. PUK's 'Adil Nasr was pleased THE PRESIDENT highlighted the odious actions terrorists undertake, such as killing women and children--a reminder for Muslims to view terrorists in their true extremist light. Likewise, the message that the US would "take the war to the terrorists' house" would cause people to realize destruction will occur in the country in which those terrorists are operating and/or supported.

4. (C/NF) By contrast, Sistani representative Ahmed al Safi was offended by the statement that the US would fight terrorism outside the US so we would not have to fight it at home, which he said makes Iraqis feel the US only values American life. Safi also said the President admitted that working in Iraq is difficult and dangerous, which he believes acknowledges the power of the terrorists and will only serve to embolden them. Safi pointed out that the reason the terrorists failed to provoke a civil war is because the Shia marja'ia and Sunni religious leaders continue to call for calm and self-restraint.

5. (C/NF) 'Abd al Hadi al-Hakim said the President's message about fighting terrorists rings false since the US is "negotiating with terrorists" and will make Iraqis turn against the political process. (Note: Hakim is referring to recent press articles alleging US negotiations with insurgents. End Note.)

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Troop Withdrawal Remains a Bone of Contention  
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16. (C/NF) Nasir was relieved the President made no mention of a timetable or force withdrawal, which implied the USG's continuing commitment to Iraq. By contrast, Sunni leaders denounced this aspect of the speech. Iraqi Islamic Party Secretary general Tarek al-Hashimi and Constitutional Monarchist advisor Faisal Kharagoli told us they were disappointed that once again, the US failed to nod in the slightest to a timetable and claimed the speech gave the impression US troops would be in Iraq for a long time to come. Undersecretary for Bilateral Affairs and SCIRI member Hamid al-Bayati separately told PolOff Bush did the right thing by not saying he was going to send more US troops to Iraq, because such an action would contravene the stated USG commitment to stand up ISF.

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Reconstruction? What Reconstruction?  
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17. (C/NF) Al-Safi said the President's pledge to rebuild the country is "a joke for the Iraqis" since they have since no improvements in over two years. Safi commented that, rather than make empty pledges, the US emphasis should be to correct the President and tell him the truth of what is happening on the ground so that when he speaks he does not do such damage to his reputation. Nasir and al-Hakim had similar reactions. Nasir noted that there is no ground truth to the reconstruction talk and the slow improvements are trying the Iraqi people's patience as well as the USG's honesty. Iraqis are fed up with US promises to rebuild Iraq because still they have seen no action to date, said Hakim separately. Hakim suggested the President should be honest with his promises or should refrain from making them; the "Iraqi people are fed up with talking." (Comment: As the Embassy has reported, there is progress on problems like electricity and water. However, many - if not most - Iraqis expected the U.S. to fix all of Iraq's enormous infrastructure problems and to fix them fast. End Comment.)

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Some Welcome Support for Political Process  
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18. (C/NF) Some of our contacts appreciated the President's declaration of support for the political process. However, Nasir wished the President had placed more emphasis on the importance of the constitution and had expressed his support for minority rights and opposition to a religious government--values many Iraqis share. Sistani's aide Al-Safi, for his part, wanted to clarify to the President that the reason some "Sunnis opposed the January elections" was because they opposed elections taking place under occupation. Shia cleric As-Saghir did not trust U.S. intentions with the political process. He said the Shia are enraged with US efforts to include Sunnis; such efforts are getting translated as bringing Ba'thists into positions of influence.

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Others Complain Speech Defends Presence of "Occupation Forces"  
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19. (C/NF) The TNA members who had only heard excerpts from the speech from the Arab media complained that Bush used his remarks to prolong and defend the presence of US troops in Iraq; they used the opportunity to complain about continued injustices to Iraqi's dignity foreign troops present.

10. (C/NF) Secular Shia TNA member Ali al-Yousha said that while he appreciated the mission the US originally came here for; he believes the Coalition Forces inflict insults to Iraqis' dignity too great to bear. Yousha recounted that US troops were welcomed when they first came when they liberated the country. Indeed, he himself guided them through parts of the South and negotiated their safe passage with local leaders. At the time, the military mingled with the people and were accepted. However, Yousha complained that the military soon afterward began changing its posture and became more aggressive and insulting.

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Speech Discussion is Catalyst to Litany of Complaints about US Military and PSD Behavior  
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11. (C/NF) Yousha said the issue of the US presence should not be "black and white". By this he meant that many Iraqis would like Coalition troops to stay as long as they change their posture and tactics. However, if their staying continues to mean daily insults to their dignity then they must leave. (Note: Yousha described US "insults" as the manner in which the military and private security details harass average Iraqis with their manner of driving, checkpoints, and aggressive weapons posture. Two other Assembly members joined the conversation, noting that in the past two days; they both had their cars smashed by USG vehicles (it is unclear whether privately-contracted PSD or Coalition military) for failing to move aside quickly enough. The TNA members complained that the narrow street had rendered it impossible for them to move out of the convoy's way. End Note.)

12. (C/NF) Al Iraqiya list Christian TNA member Wijdan Salim said she also had heard excerpts of the President's speech, and proceeded to tell PolOff that Iraqis, even educated ones such as herself, find it too difficult to bear seeing foreign troops drive through their streets. Salim acknowledged Iraq's need for Coalition presence while Iraq builds its nascent security forces, however she hoped the troops could move to bases outside the cities.

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Comment  
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13. (C/NF) Discussing the President's speech with Iraqi politicians provided a unique insight into the situation in Iraq from their ground perspective, such as the realities of the painfully slow pace of reconstruction. Not surprisingly, the Arab media's focus on the President's lack of withdrawal timeline gave Iraqis an opportunity to reiterate their complaints about Coalition troop presence. We often hear such complaints, frequently from Assembly members. However, we find very few Assembly members, even among the loudest complainers, who would go so far as to recommend prompt withdrawal of all Coalition Forces. We found that those who actually read the speech were much more favorable about the President's remarks than those who depended solely on Arab media reporting. This is a reminder that we need put out a clear message about Iraq policy regularly for Iraqis.

14. (U) REO HILLA, REO BASRA, REO MOSUL, and REO KIRKUK, minimize considered.

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